



Arawak Tribe: History, Language & Symbols

If you would like to learn more about the very first native tribe encountered by Christopher Columbus, this lesson is for you. In this lesson we will discuss the history and language of the Arawak Tribe.

The Arawak Tribe

When Christopher Columbus first arrived in the New World, he landed on the island of Hispaniola (modern day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in the West Indies. The very first people he encountered were the **Arawak** tribe, also called the Taino. Unfortunately for these native peoples, the European diseases of measles and smallpox that Columbus and his crew carried with them, nearly killed all of the Arawak. Fortunately, in parts of the West Indies and South America, a few of the Arawak tribe survive to this day.

In these remaining members, vestiges of the Arawak tribe's history and language also survive as well.

Arawak History

The Arawak were a peaceful farming tribe who date back to pre-historic times. They lived throughout the Caribbean and in parts of South America around the Andes Mountains, and in Guyana. As they were not natural fighters, other tribes in the Caribbean like the Caribs often forced them to relocate. This aspect of their nature also explains why Columbus described them in his letters back to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, as docile, and could be easily made to comply and yield to any demand from Spain.

The Arawak lived in farming communities where they grew their main three subsistence crops of maize (corn), tobacco, and cassava. Women did most of the work among the Arawak and were responsible for the farming, cooking, and care of children.

While Arawak women worked, men lounged in hammocks, which were later adopted by European sailors as a more suitable option for bedding than the flea-infested straw they used. The Arawak also practiced rigorous hygienic practices, like frequent bathing, believing that sweat was bad for the soul.



Arawak Women in Social Scene

Encomienda System

When the Spanish arrived in Hispaniola in 1492, Columbus enslaved a few of the Arawak to transport back to Spain, to display to the King and Queen. It was also intended that they should learn Spanish and convert to Christianity so that when they returned to their island home, they could teach their fellow tribesmen their new language and religion.

Spain then instituted the **encomienda system** which was a way to control the labor and interactions of the Arawak tribe. Mercantilism was sweeping through the empires of Europe as a new form of economic competition, and nations like Spain needed more access to gold and silver mines to increase their economic viability.

Conquistadors, or Spanish explorers of the New World like Columbus, were given an encomienda by the Spanish crown. This encomienda was not a land grant, but a grant of a certain amount of Arawak tribesmen and women to be used as slave labor to mine for gold and silver. Eventually, an encomienda did become a grant of land, but this change was due to the fact that conquistadors frequently took lands away from the Arawak, after forcing them into slavery.

Part of the encomienda system was the Christianization of the Arawak which conquistadors (joined by Catholic missionaries) were supposed to implement as well. Christianity was used as a means of teaching them the value of obeying one's master. The Arawak had no concept of land ownership or the ownership of private property. As long as the gold and silver mines continued to yield the precious metals, the Spanish continued to enslave more native populations in the West Indies and the Americas.

As more Spanish arrived in the Caribbean and in South America, more carriers of smallpox and measles descended on the native population who possessed no natural defenses against these diseases. Epidemics killed hundreds of thousands, decimating populations of Arawak in Hispaniola, and in South America.

It is believed that when Columbus arrived in Hispaniola in the 1490s, there were millions of Arawak who greeted him and his crew with gifts of trade and welcome. By the 1530s around 85% of them were dead. Many of the Spanish men raped and/or married Arawak women leading to a new race of natives called **mestizos**.

These mixed race offspring also intermarried with African slaves as they began being transported to the West Indies and to South America in the 1600s. Today, the mixed race (Arawak, Spanish, African) descendants of the Arawak and Taino tribe can be seen in Guyana, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

Arawak Language and Symbols

The Arawak language is referred to as **Lokono**, which is also used as an alternate term for the Arawak people meaning 'the people'. Today you can still hear the language spoken. It is a subject, verb, object (SVO) language, meaning the subject is first in an Arawak sentence, followed by the verb, and concluding with the object. Arawak is also an **agglutinating language**, in that one word can have many different parts that can change the meaning of the word, when they are interchanged.

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